

# Being a Montgomery County crossing guard has its benefits - \$40 per hour

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If you want to make at least \$40 an hour, Montgomery County has a job for you: helping students cross the street.

And you can work as little as one hour a day — 30 minutes in the morning and another half-hour after school.

The county's 177 crossing guards are costing taxpayers \$4.6 million this year — or about \$26,000 each when benefits are included — amid drastic budget cuts to public safety departments and planned layoffs for about 100 firefighters,

The Washington Examiner has learned.

The price driver: Crossing guards receive the same benefits packages as full-time employees, which means the county spends more on perks than wages for them.

Once considered the best-kept secret among a workforce of 30,000, the position has become one of the county's most popular, particularly among those seeking health care coverage for their families. The arrangement has been in place for more than a decade, and the wait list for the job is now a few hundred deep, police say.

"I'm not going to lie; The main motivator for this job is the benefits," said Eden Crane, taking a break from helping students near Rock Creek Forest Elementary School in Chevy Chase. "They are pretty insane. I waited for three years to land this job -- and I feel so lucky to have it."

Deployed mainly to elementary schools, most crossing guards are paid to work two and a half hours a day during the school year. But taxpayers are billed, on average, for 3.3 hours of work a day, according to the county's budget office, which amounts to \$41.50 an hour.

However, almost two dozen crossing guards surveyed by The Examiner said they work no more than an hour a day, the minimum requirement for billing the county for two and a half hours of work.

Supporters of the arrangement say the perks are necessary to keep the jobs filled and ensure younger students aren't fending for themselves when walking some of county's busiest streets.

"It would be next to impossible to retain quality people if you only paid them for what they worked," said Captain Thomas Didone, director of Montgomery County's traffic division.

And public safety officials point to a flurry of recent pedestrian accidents as justification for the guards.

"The benefits package is good business," said Patrick Lacefield, spokesman for County Executive Ike Leggett. "It is important in attracting and keeping good people to do the valuable work of protecting our kids given the obvious drawback of not being able to assure folks of more than a few hours of work a day for part of the year."

In comparison, Fairfax County pays 64 crossing guards hourly wages between \$12.80 and \$21.34, depending on seniority. To receive health benefits, crossing guards must take on a second job that enables them to work 40 hours every two weeks.

Of the millions of dollars devoted to crossing guards, 45 percent of the funding is for group insurance plans.

"Wow, that's incredible," Councilman Marc Elrich, D-at large, said upon learning of the ratio. "If everything is on the table -- as we have been saying with our budget problems -- this certainly has to be in the discussion."

Police say they hire the "most qualified" people for the positions, but current crossing guards admit that job placement is mostly tied to personal connections.

"This may be the most sought-after job in the county," Elizabeth Bruzee said while directing traffic at Maryvale Elementary School in Rockville, herself a budget casualty in the libraries department this year. "I was really lucky to get this. They sent out an e-mail to county employees, and I jumped on it."